Linguistic Features of Newspaper Headlines

Asst. Prof. Dr. Qais Abdul Majeed Abdulla
University of Anbar
College of Education for Humanities

Younis Mehdi Salih
MA Student
Dept. of English

Abstract

The present study aims at investigating the linguistic features of headlines . It is an attempt to shed light on the morphology , semantics and syntax of headlines and to find out the differences between the language of headlines and the ordinary language . Headlines represent the most important part of news since they summarize the whole article or news story and they are the vital element through which the reader decides whether to read or leave the article . Due to pressure on page , the study postulates that the language of headlines deviates much from the ordinary language in terms of vocabulary and structure .There are some typical features in newspaper headlines that aim at getting the attention of readers .These features like the choice of words and grammatical structure are manipulated by headline writers to achieve impact and influence the readers to go on reading the report .

المستخلص

تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى تقصي الخصائص اللغوية لعناوين الصحف وهي محاولة لتسليط الضوء على صرف ودلالة ونحو العناوين ولإيجاد الفرق بين لغة العناوين و اللغة الاعتيادية . تمثل العناوين الجزء الأهم من الأخبار كونها تلخص مجمل المقالة أو الخبر وهي العنصر الأساسي الذي بموجبه يقرر القارئ أن يقرأ أو أن يترك قراءة المقال . بسبب قلة **المساحة** على صفحة الصحيفة تفترض الدراسة بان لغة العناوين تختلف عن اللغة الاعتيادية فيما يتعلق بالمفردات والتركيب .هناك بعض الخصائص المميزة لعناوين الصحف ترمي إلى جلب انتباه القراء . يستخدم كتاب العناوين هذه الخصائص مثل اختيار المفردة والتركيب النحوي لتحفيز وإثارة القارئ للاستمرار في قراءة التقرير .

Introduction

Journalistic language has its own characteristics that differentiate it from the 'common core '. Crystal (2003a :85) defines common core as " a range of linguistic features found in all varieties , dialects , etc. of a language . Common core features of language would include its basic rules of word order and word formation and its high frequency vocabulary ."

Through the language used in newspapers , people get information about various fields .Thus the main function of language is informational and at the same time it has the power of influencing and persuading readers ,so it also has a directive function .Richardson (2007 :13) believes that the language of newspapers can 'do ' things in society .And since there are different functions newspapers try to accomplish like informing , instructing and entertaining the reader , so there are different styles to achieve these purposes .

Some of the headlines are taken from daily British newspapers :The Times , The Guardian and The Independent .

2- Headlines

Headlines are titles that appear over news articles .Van Dijk (1988 :53) believes that a headline expresses the major topic of the text . It summarizes the whole report .To Bird and Merwin (1955 :177) the headline conveys the highlights in short ,easily understood words .It is a ' miniature replica ' of the story .

Headline writers seek to influence readers . Cotter (2010 :26) states that " headlines are short maximally informative and font size or type face a semiotic stand-in for importance ". The impact that headlines achieve through

linguistic features makes them memorable (Develotte and Rechniewski, 2001 :2).

Headlines are the most important elements in the newspaper since they inform the reader of what the article is about or as Dor (2003 :718) explains that headlines are often scanned by most readers without reading the articles.

Bird and Merwin (1955 :178) mention that the features of the headline like large bold type and its extension over two or more columns to be easily seen help to attract the readers' attention . To Crystal and Davy (1969 : 174)

> Headlines have to contain a clear , succinct and if possible intriguing message , to kindle a spark of interest in the potential reader , who , an average , is a person whose eyes moves swiftly down a page and stops when something catches his attention.

According to Dor (2003 : 697-98) the traditional view that the headline presents a summary of the story is criticised due to three reasons :First ,some headlines highlight a single detail of the story or contain a quotation from the story or some headlines contain materials which do not appear in the news item ; second ,some headlines contain complex riddles especially in tabloid newspapers and Third headlines have a pragmatic function .To Mirabela and Ariana (2010 :187) the pragmatic function is achieved through linguistic features of the headline "The author shows his application of the reader 's capability to understand and notice linguistic features by using different linguistic methods to enhance the effect of the headline ." Therefore one may conclude that headlines do not necessarily give a summary of the story or article since sometimes the sub-editor tries to arouse the readers' curiosity through different techniques.

Halliday (1985 : 372)refers to headlines as " little texts " and since they have to convey more through few words due limited space , they have their own grammar . This special language is called ' block language ' . It is defined by Mathews (2007 :42) as the form of abbreviated structures used in newspaper headlines , in cables ,in notices ,on labels of products and so on .

Headlines perform four basic functions (Mallette ,1990 :80 cited in Bedrichova ,2006 :14). These functions are :

a. to summarize the news

b. to grade the importance of stories

c. to act as clear elements in the design of a page

d. to persuade the looker into becoming a reader

3- The Morphology of Headlines

Morphology investigates the internal structure of words . This section deals with the morphological characteristics found in headlines .

3.1 Conversion

It is also known as zero-derivation in which a word is used as another part of speech without any suffix or change of form .For example a noun may be used as a verb or a verb may be used as a noun (Hudson , 2000 :257). Swan (2005 :211-12) provides these examples which show the shift in class :

(1) US CUTS AID TO THIRD WORLD

(cut is a verb meaning reduce and aid is a noun)

(2) CUTS AID REBELS

(cut is a noun meaning reduction while aid is a verb meaning help)

Conversion . as used in headlines ,leads to ambiguity since sometimes it is not clear whether the word is a noun or a verb especially when grammatical words are omitted .

(3) SQUAD HELPS DOG BITE VICTIM

This headline can be interpreted as a police squad helps a victim of dog bite in which bite is a noun .The other interpretation is that the police squad helps the dog to bite a victim in which bite is a verb . The source of such ambiguity is whether the word **bite** is a noun or a verb (Bucaria , 2004 : 60)

Conversion is not restricted to nouns and verbs , adjectives may be used as verbs also ,as **top** which can be used as a verb meaning **exceed** :

(4) IMPORTS TOP LAST YEAR 'S FIGURES

and as an adjective meaning **senior** or **most important**

(5) TOP BANKER KIDNAPPED (Swan ,2005 :220)

3.2 Abbreviations

Abbreviations are widely used in headlines because they save space on page and they also require the readers to stop a little to think of the original word or expression .Abbreviations include different ways of shortening words like initialisms , acronymy , clipping and blending . Initialism is the process in

which initials are pronounced as separate letters ,like PM for (Prime Minister) and DWI for (drawing while intoxicated (Crystal , 2003a:1).

(6) SYRIAN REGIME ACCUSED OF CRIMES

AGAINST HUMANITY BY **UN** (G. Feb ,24,2012)

Acronyms are formed from the first letters of succession of words where they are pronounced as ordinary words like ,Nato /neito/ (Stageberg ,1981:123).

KILLED IN AFGHANISTAN (Ind.March,1,2012)

(7) TWO NATO TROOPS

Clipping words are common in headlines where a part of a word stands for the whole .This part may be the beginning as in **demo** and **exam** or the end of the word as **bus** and **plane** or sometimes the middle part is kept as in **fridge** and **flu** (Crystal , 2003b :120).

(8) 30 ARRESTED IN ANTI-TAX **DEMO** (Swan ,2005 :214)

Richardson (2007 :69)states that words can also be formed blending which is the use of the first part of a word with the last part of another . Crystal (2003b :130) mentions that blends are used in advertising contexts .Blending forms are eye-catching and exciting .

(9)EUROFIFGTER DEAL 'CAN STILL BE SNATCHED FROM FRANCE'

(EUROFIGHTER :European and fighter plane)

2.3 Neologism

Morphologists divide words into actual words and possible words. The number of words in a language is not fixed . speakers or writers can create

new words and hearers or readers can understand unlimited number of new words (Haspelmath, 2002:39) . Neologisms are common in newspapers .To Crystal (2003a :315) in newspaper headlines neologisms result from space constraints .

Richardson (2007 :69) adds that neologisms can be formed by prefixes or suffixes . For example the use of '-gate ' as a suffix to designate a scandal like Irangate ,Lewinskygate and Rathergate .

3- The Semantics of Headlines

3.1 Vocabulary

Newspaper headlines use a lot of distinctive vocabulary . Headline producers usually prefer words that are shorter and sound more dramatic than ordinary English words . Headline vocabulary is characterized as being unusual and sensational (McCarthy and O'Dell,2001:200 ; Swan , 2005 :212).

Khodabandeh (2007 :107) argues that monosyllabic verbs and nouns are used instead of longer ones in headlines . For example **win** for' victory' , **ex** for' former' , **job** for 'appointment' and **OK** for 'accept' .

Headline writers choose the most effective and emphatic words and avoid any word that might weaken the effect of the headline on their readers (Bird and Merwin , 1955 :178)

Bucaria (2004 :43) points out that one of the most important features of headlines is the use of 'loaded' words and expressions which carry strong connotation and hence attract attention . As far as vocabulary is concerned ,headlines are considered ' rich ' since lexical words , which convey meaning , are retained while grammatical words usually omitted because they are semantically empty .

Headline writers use euphemistic

meaning for words especially in reporting wars . For 'kill' they may use **engage** ,**neutralize** or **take out** ; **theatre** for 'battlefield' and **friendly fire** for the one being killed by his own army (Richardson , 2007 :69).

McCarthy and O'Dell(2001:200) and Swan (2005:212-21) provide a list of the words that are typical in newspaper headlines and their counterparts in common language .

Newspaper word	Meaning	Example
allege	make an accusation	WOMAN ALLEGES UNFAIR TREATMENT
bar (n. ,v.)	exclude , forbid	NEW BAR ON IMMIGRANTS HOTEL BARS FOOTBALL FANS
clash (n. , v.)	dispute , quarrel	PM IN CLASH OVER ARMS SALES STUDENTS CLASH WITH POLICE
leap	big increase	LEAP IN IMPORTS
Key	important	KEY WITNESS VANISHES
oust	remove , replace	MODERATES OUSTED IN UNION ELECTIONS
pledge (n. ,v.)	promise	GOVERNMENT GIVES PLEDGE ON JOBLESS
probe (n. ,v.)	investigation	CALL FOR STUDENT DRUG PROBE

		PLOICE PROBE RACING SCANDAL
riddle	mystery	MISSING ENVOY RIDDLE ,WOMAN HELD
slate	criticise	PM SLATES BISHOP

3.2 Ambiguity

Conway (2002 :5) defines ambiguity as " uncertainty among specific alternatives ". It exists when a word , phrase or a sentence lend itself to more than interpretation . Hudson(2000:313-14) states that ambiguity differs from vagueness in that in the case of vagueness the number of possible meanings is quite open . To Saeed (1997 :60-61) the context can help in choosing one of the meanings of the word in the case of ambiguity while in the case of vagueness the context can add information that is not specified in the sense .Kempson (1977:126) provides the following example which can be explained by the context .

(10) I 've done the sitting-room

It may be said by a person who has cleaned it ,painted it , laid the floor in it , emptied it, set a light to it ,etc. So the interpretation is dependent on the context . To Fromkin et al.(2007:178) " the meaning of a linguistic expression is built both on the words it contains and its syntactic structure ". Therefore there are two types of ambiguity : lexical and syntactic .

3.2.1 Types of Ambiguity

3.2.1.1 Lexical Ambiguity

This type of ambiguity occurs when a form of a word has more than one meaning . It result from the existence of homonymy and polysemy . Bucaria (2004 :52) argues that in lexical ambiguity , the lexical item does not change the part of speech .

(11) MEN RECOMMEND MORE CLUBS FOR WIVES

In this headline , ambiguity is triggered by the noun **club** which can mean " an association of persons for some common object " or " a heavy staff especially of wood used by the hand as a striking weapon ". One interpretation is that men call for more associations for wives while the other is that they advocate that wives should be beaten.

3.2.1.2 Syntactic or structural ambiguity

Syntactic ambiguity arises not from the range of meanings of single words , but from the location of the words in sentences (Conway, 2002:4) . Syntactic ambiguity occurs when the part of speech changes from verb to noun or adjective and vice versa . Richardson (2007:24-25) states that the meaning and function of a word is implied by grammar . He gives the following example :

(12) JUVENILE COURT TO TRY SHOOTING DEFENDANT

In this headline , there are two ambiguous words , try which can mean ' to attempt ' or ' to put on trial , and shooting which can be used as a verb or a noun . Here the headline may be interpreted as to try shooting [somebody] or to put on trial the defendant of shooting .

(13) TEACHER STRIKES IDLE KIDS

There are two interpretations for this headlines . One interpretation is that teachers ' strike makes kids idle where **strikes** is a plural noun and **idle** is the verb . The other meaning is that teachers beat lazy pupils where **strike** is a

verb and **idle** is the adjective that modifies **kids** (Bucaria,2004:16).

In passive constructions , where the auxiliary is usually omitted ,

Ambiguity may arise when the same form of the past tense is used for past participle . In such a case the headline may have more than one interpretation .

(14) US TOLD TO END BLAME GAME ON SUPPORT FOR TALBAN

(Ind. Feb.,2,2012)

In this headline ,one meaning is that US told other countries to end the accusation that US help Taliban .The second interpretation is that another country (here is Pakistan) told US to stop accusing them of supporting Taliban . Here the omission of the auxiliary creates ambiguity whether US is the agent or the patient.

Some past participles that are used as adjectives can lead to ambiguity .(Bremner , 1972 :12) gives the following headline :

(15) POLICE **STONED** IN HARTFORD

In this headline the word **stoned** is either an adjective meaning" drunk" or a past participle meaning" attacked with stones" .

Another type of syntactic ambiguity is grouping ambiguity (Hudson , 2000: 314) .In other words, when a string of words may have more than one meaning depending on different possible groupings .Lobner (2002: 46) provides the following example :

(16) She watched the man with the binoculars

In this example the PP " with the binoculars " can be related to the verb **watched** to mean " she used the binoculars to watch the man" or the PP may be related to the man as " the man who had the binoculars"

Bucaria (2004 :63) assures that such a type of ambiguity occurs in headlines when a phrase or clause may modify more than one component of the sentence .

(17) HOW TO COMBAT THE FEELING OF HELPLESSNESS WITH ILLEGAL DRUGS

Here the PP "with illegal drugs " can be related to the verb combat which leads to humorous interpretation while the other interpretation is that this PP can be attached to " the feeling of helplessness " which is the serious interpretation that means a feeling of helplessness is caused by illegal drugs " . "

4- The Syntax of Headlines

Syntax is the study of the rules that govern the combination of words in sentences (Crystal ,2003a :451). It refers to the possible arrangements of elements within a sentence . Headlines have special language which does not follow the rules of normal English grammar . Quirk et al. (1985 :845-46) and Swan (2005 :211-12) list some syntactic features that are characteristic of news headlines :

1. The omission of closed –class items since they have low information value such as auxiliaries , articles and words that can be understood from the context .

(18) JOURNALISTS KILLED IN ARAB SPRING UPRISING

(G. Feb.24,2012)

2.The simple present is used instead of the present perfect which is manipulated to describe recent news. (19)

FRONTLINE HERO REVEALS THE FLAWS IN AFGHANISTAN (T.,Feb.,6, 2012)

3.Future is expressed by "**to** "

(20) CHINA TO PRESS FOR SYRIA CEASEFIRE (Ind.,March,6 ,2012)

4.Asyndeton , which represents the omission of conjunctions , is more common . It is used to achieve an economical or dramatic form of expression (Crystal , 2003a ,450)

(21)ONE FALKLAND PROBLEM , ONE CIVILISED SOLUTION

(T.,Jan.,14 ,2012)

5. Verbs that are generally transitive are used intransitively .

(22) BRITISH VICTORY SURPRIZES

6.Headlines often contain strings of three or more nouns ,earlier nouns modify those that follow .

(23) FURNITURE FACTORY PAY CUT ROW

Such type of headline is difficult to understand . It may be read backwards **row** refers to a disagreement on **cut** which is a reduction in **pay** at a **factory** that makes furniture (Swan ,2005 :212).

4.1Formal Types of Headlines

Headlines can be classified on the basis of form into three types: verbal ,nominal and adverbial (Mardh , 1980 :49).

4.1.1 Verbal Headlines

This type of headlines contains a verb form which function as a central clause element . It is central since it determines other elements of the clause (Biber et al. ,1999:126). Verbal headlines are divided into finite , non-finite , verbal headlines with omitted auxiliaries ,subject complement headlines and subject adverbial headlines .

a. Finite verb Headlines

According to Quirk et al.(1985 :149) a finite verb phrase consists of a finite verb form. It is specified for tense or mood and it may be marked for aspect and voice (Biber et al. ,1999:99) .Swan (2005 :211) points out that headline producers prefer to use simple tenses rather than progressive or perfect forms .

(24) AFGHAN REFUGEES ABANDONED BY THEIR OWN GOVERNMENT ,REPORT FINDS (G. Feb.,24,2012)

b. Non-finite Verbal Headlines

As their name suggests , they contain non-finite verb forms .Non-finite verbs are not marked for tense , person, aspect or mood (Tallerman ,2005:73) .They may take the form of "to " infinitive ,"-ing " participle or " ed " participle (Quirk et al. ,1985 :150).

(25) HIDING WITH STARVED REBELS IN THEIR MUDDY BATTLE FOR SYRIA (T. ,Jan.,17,2012)

(26)HANDICAPPED DUO ROW ACROSS ATLANTIC (Swan,2005:215)

c. Verbal Headlines with omitted auxiliaries

Auxiliaries are usually left out in headlines. Halliday (1985:374) points out that be is the most common omitted auxiliary .But the omission does not

affect the decoding of the message and readers can easily recover the original structure (Bedrichova, 2006 :28). The omission of auxiliary makes the verbal group non-finite since the tense carrier is left out (Halliday ,1985:373 and Khodabandeh, 2007:97).The passive constitute the most majority of auxiliary omission .

(27) AT LEAST 49 DEAD AND HUNDREDS INJURED AS TRAIN CRASHES IN ARGENTINA (G., Feb.,23, 2012)

d. Subject complement Headlines

A subject complement may be an adjective or a noun phrase .It

applies some attribute or definition to the subject (Quirk et al.,1985 :55). It is usually preceded by copular verbs (Biber et al. ,1999:126). But in headlines such copular verbs are usually deleted , the meaning is conveyed by the complement .

(28) IRAQ : 13 DEAD IN CO-ORDINATED BOMB ATTACK (Ind., March ,8 ,2012)

e. Subject Adverbial Headlines

They follow the clause type SVA . In such type the adverbial is usually an adverbial of place preceded by copular verb such as " My sister lives next door " (Quirk et al.,1985 :56). Copular verbs are deleted in this type of headlines .

(29) OBAMA 'S UNCLE IN DOCK (T.,Jan.,13,2012)

(30) UN IN SOUTH SUDAN (T.,Jan.,24 ,2012)

4.1.2 Nominal Headlines

A nominal headline is a headline that does not have a verb phrase at all or where a verb phrase exists but headed by another noun phrase. The noun phrase is a phrase that is headed by a noun . The head may occur alone or it may be accompanied by one or more other constituents (Crystal , 2003b : 222) . Nominal headlines provide information with a limited number of words (Halliday ,1985:373-74). They enable the author to delete both participants i.e. the agent and patient ,and the indication of time since there is no verb to express the tense (Bedrichova ,2006 :36) .

(31) THE JEWEL IN CHINA'S LUXURY GOODS CROWN (T.Jan.,23,2012)

(32)LOCKED ARCHIVES THAT GUARD THE CATHOLIC CHURCH 'S GUILTY SECRETS (T., Jan.,17 ,2012)

4.1.3 Adverbial Headlines

Adverbials are realized by different syntactic forms . They may be single adverbs ,adverb phrases , noun phrases , prepositional phrases , finite or non-finite clauses . An adverbial headline is the one that is headed by one of the above forms (Biber et al. ,1999:767) . Adverbials are of different types like time , place , reason , etc. .Adverbial headlines are the least used types as compared with verbal and nominal headlines (Khodabandeh,2007 :108).

(33) NOW ,OLD ETONIONS ARE STORMING THE WHITE HOUSE

(Ind. ,March ,11 ,2012)

4.2 Functional Types of Headlines

Language users communicate ideas , express feelings , attitudes and needs i.e. achieve certain functions. Sentences are classified in terms f

function into four categories : statements , questions , commands and exclamations (Crystal , 2003a :192).

Function refers to the purpose of a sentence . If it declares information ,it is a statement ,when it requires an answer ,it asks a question ,when it tells others to do or not to do something ,it is a command and it is exclamatory if it expresses a strong feeling or emotion (Arnold , 1996 :100).

4.2.1 Statement Headlines

A statement is a sentence whose primary purpose is to convey information (Crystal ,2003b:218). It consists of a subject followed by a verb (Quirk et al. ,1985:803) .This type of headline usually has a declarative structure i.e. to declare or make something known (Crystal ,2003b :218) . But sometimes there is a mismatch between the structure and function . In other words a declarative form may be used as a question either through intonation in speech or a question mark in writing . Since one of the main functions of headlines is to convey information , so the statement headlines are the most frequent type .

(34) ASSAD OFFER OF SYRIAN MULTI–PARTY ELECTIONS BRANDED LAUGHABLE BY US (G. ,Feb. ,16,2012)

4.2.2 Question Headlines

Questions are used in headlines to stimulate the readers' curiosity to read what follows the headline . Such question headlines do not require answers on the part of readers since the writer himself provides the answer within the article . Syntactically questions are sentences with inversion of subject and verb , the use of question words or end with a question tag (Crystal

,2003a:384) .Praskova (2009:22) states that questions make the headlines attractive and catching .

(35) WILL VLADIMIR PUTIN 'S VOTING CHANCES BE HURT BY ' CLOISERED WIFE ' RUMOURS ? (G. , Feb. ,28 ,2012)

4.2.3 Command Headlines

According to Crystal (2003a:83) " Syntactically a command is a sentence which typically has no subject and where the verb is in the imperative mood ". A command is used to instruct someone to do something (Crystal ,2003b :219). To Khodabandeh (2007 :99) a command headline is a request or advice . Command headlines are used to urge the reader to do or not to do something . They are frequent in advertisement (Crystal, 2003b :219) .

(36)TELL THE WORLD WE 'RE TRAPPED AND LIVING IN HELL

(T. Jan. ,31,2012)

4.2.4 Exclamation Headlines

Exclamations resemble Wh questions in that they begin with Wh element but differ from them in that they do not require subject–verb inversion (Quirk et al. ,1985 :87) .They are used to express the speakers ' feeling . They may be a full sentence or they take the form of a single word or phrase . Sometimes their form is reduced and no verb is used.(Crystal ,2003b:219).

(37) CAUGHT ! SCOTTISH SKIPPERS FINED £720,000

OVERFISHING FRAUD (Ind.,Feb.,25, 2012)

To sum up , statements among all the functional headline types are the most commonly used type since they enable the headline producers to

convey information and to condense as much as possible information within the permitted space on page so that the reader may get a glimpse of the essence of the story .

Conclusions

The language of headlines is different from the ordinary language in the following points :

1. In headlines , abbreviations are frequently manipulated by sub-editors to cope with space pressure.

2. Headline writers use special vocabulary that is unusual outside headlines in order to grab the readers' attention .

3. Ambiguity in headlines helps in achieving the attention-seeking function of headlines as they arouse the readers' curiosity to read the article to solve the ambiguity .

4. Statement headlines are the most frequent kind in newspapers because they fulfill one of the functions of headlines which is to inform the reader of what the article is about .

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